The Battle of Qara-Hamid: A real battle or just a small raid narrative?

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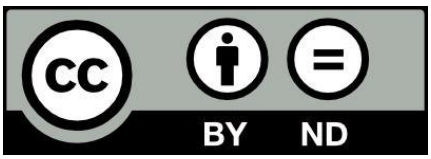

Abstract

First of all, there were long-lasting wars between the Ottoman and Safavid Empires. In these wars, sometimes the Ottomans, and at other times the Safavids, achieved victory. In addition, we know that the Safavids employed a war of attrition strategy similar to the Fabian strategy against the Ottomans. The point I want to emphasize is that nowadays new "Ottoman–Safavid wars" are emerging. In other words, while these wars were previously almost unknown and unresearched, today they are increasingly being shared, often drawn from Mehman Suleymanov's multi-volume work *Safavids*, or turned into edited videos. The reason behind this is the intense rivalry among those editors.

Solely for the purpose of glorifying either the Ottomans or the Safavids, for example as a counter-edit to the Battle of Chaldiran, we can often see in almost every edit the sharing of a clash of no real importance — merely a skirmish of vanguard forces or a raid. This situation applies to both sides. From here, we advise them to carefully investigate everything they read, and then we proceed to the main topic of the article.

Review

Battle of Qara Hamid is described on Azerbaijani Wikipedia by one contributor as follows:

“After successfully completing the Khorasan and Turkestan campaigns and returning to Tabriz, Shah Ismail soon received a new letter from Mehmed Khan Ustaclu, the governor of Diyarbakır. In this letter, Mehmed Khan reported that Prince Selim, son of Ottoman Sultan Bayezid, was causing disturbances along the western borders of the Safavid realm. According to Mehmed Khan, Prince Selim had gathered a large force, about 30–40.000 troops, and together with Mustafa Pasha had attacked the fortress of Qara Hamid. At that time Mehmed Khan Ustaclu was ill, so he allowed his brother Karakhan to confront the Ottoman forces with a detachment of 10–12.000 men. Karakhan then inflicted a heavy blow on the Ottoman army. When it was learned that Karakhan had crossed the border, sources state that the sultan’s forces failed to achieve their aim and were forced to retreat. This operation lasted only 15 days. Shah Ismail was extremely angered by this news, and in a letter he sent to Mehmed Khan, he demanded that if Prince Selim attacked the Safavid borders again, he

should immediately inform him. Shah Ismail declared that he would personally come to confront the Ottoman sultan's son and would flay the skin from his head. Nevertheless, Shah Ismail also deemed it appropriate to write a letter to the Ottoman sultan. That letter and valuable gifts were entrusted to Suleyman Yasavul, who was sent as envoy to the Ottoman court to deliver them. Among the gifts were part of the booty taken from Abulkhayr Khan, a piece of Chinggis Khan's banner, and the blood-stained ornament of Abulkhayr Khan's throne."

These accounts in Wikipedia are accurate with their sources, meaning Mehman Süleymanov actually mentioned such an event in Volume II of his book *Safavids* and Namiq Musalı's book, citing the source (Süleymanov; 2021; v. II;598; Musalı; 2011; 236). The source is Âlemârâ-yi Safevî. The objectivity of this work is questionable because it states that Shah Ismail or his commander defeated Sultan Selim at Kemah Castle after Chaldiran. As you read it, you will find plenty of evidence that it is biased. We often see non-existent events or exaggerations of them. For this reason, the actual occurrence of the battle is somewhat questionable.

We know that in 1510, Sultan Selim also left his post in the province. Selim set out from Trabzon in the last days

of September and reached Kefe on October 10 (Emecen; 2016; 48). Therefore, the war must have begun before September 1510.

Looking at Ottoman records, it is possible to see that there is no mention of such a war. However, it should not be forgotten that there was a great deal of conflict on the Ottoman-Safavid border between 1499 and 1512 (Özger; 2007). It would not be correct to assume that the Ottomans were always victorious in these conflicts. Sometimes different battles are mentioned in different sources, and it is possible to see that different sides were victorious in these battles (Musalı; September 26-28, 2019). Selim saw the Safavids as a major threat, and raids and attacks continued. One of these was the much-discussed battle of Qara-Hamid.

As mentioned above, the work Âlemârâ-yi Safevî or Âlemârâ-yi Şâh İsmail states that Selim's Ottoman forces raided the Safavid border with an army of 30-40,000. Upon this, Muhammad Khan, who was ill at the time, sent his brother Kara Khan to fight the Ottomans. However, there is something we are overlooking: Prince Selim himself did not raid the Safavid border, he only sent an army. This is the most common misconception. Namiq Musalı points this out in his work, The Reign of Shah Ismail. In other words, Selim was not present at the

battle. More importantly, Kara Khan opposes this force with an army of 10-12,000 and crosses the border, conducting a 15-day raid within Ottoman territory. Shah Ismail is very angry at Selim's actions.

However, it is unclear what kind of clash this was. This is because we do not have information to determine whether it was a raid, a field battle, or another type of conflict. Furthermore, we do not find this information in either Venetian or European sources, nor in Ottoman sources. However, there is one exception: Şükr-i Bidlisi's Selimname (Tansel; 2017; 300). This source only provides information about the 15-day raid by Kara Han and his unit. In general, we know that Kara Han avoided direct confrontation with Prince Selim. Thus, attrition tactics were employed here as well. Furthermore, it is noted that the Kızılbash gained considerable loot after the 15-day operation (Musalı; 2011).

In short, due to the conflict and tension between them, Selim sent an army to raid the Safavid border. This army attacked the Qara-Hamid castle in Diyarbekir but was defeated by Kara Han Ustajlu. Kara Han and his troops then made a short tactical raid on the Ottoman border and obtained loot.

In fact, according to Âlemârâ, there were six clashes between the Ustajlu and the Ottomans between 1508 and 1510, caused by Selim. First, a unit sent by Selim was defeated in Erzincan, then Selim attacked again and won the ensuing battle, which is also recorded in Ottoman records, and some say this battle took place in 1507, 1508, and 1509. Following this, Selim sent letters to surrounding regions calling them to join his new attack and himself attacked Erzincan (Musalı; 26-28 September, 2019). These details should also be taken into consideration.

Regarding the accuracy of this clash, which is now gaining recognition, I can say that it is most likely true. This is because there is an account in the Selimname about Kara Khan's raid, and it is probable that Selim carried out a raid during this tense period. We know that the clash took place in 1510 because it happened after Shah Ismail returned from his Horasan campaign. And, as I mentioned above, it must have taken place before September. As for its accuracy, it is normal for Ottoman records to conceal their defeats, and Selim's previous actions, such as sending letters to neighboring regions encouraging them to attack, i.e., his constant readiness to raid, prove this.

According to some Ottoman sources, in the summer of 1509, Selim raided Erzincan, defeated the Kızılbash, and captured the land up to Bayburt (Musalı; September 26-28, 2019; 726). Therefore, it is difficult to determine the exact date of the battle, but I can say with 100% certainty that it took place between the summer of 1509 and September 1510. However, the number of 30-40,000 may be an exaggeration, because some sources mention that Selim defended the region against the Kızılbaş with only a few hundred men. But we must not forget that he also received support from surrounding regions and increased his army's numbers to boost his influence and chances of victory when launching the attack. Therefore, a figure like 40,000 is far too high. This number would be at most 10-20,000.

Conclusion

It was most likely not a major battle, but rather a small-scale skirmish. It had no significant impact, but it did enable the Safavids to carry out their 15-day raid. It did not stop the Ottoman raids either, as Selim's departure from there within the same year and the letter sent to Bayezid halted the raids. In other words, it is one of the victories achieved by the Safavids during the conflicts of 1499-1512.

In short, events most likely unfolded as follows: Selim sent an army of probably 10-20,000 men to Diyarbekir

sometime between the summer of 1509 and September 1510, and his army was defeated by Kara Han in a minor skirmish at Qara-Hamid. Kara Han then immediately launched a brief attack on the Ottoman border and obtained booty. Upon hearing that Selim had sent an army to raid Diyarbekir, Ismail became very angry and sent a letter of friendship to Bayezid to prevent such troubles from occurring.

Diyarbekir Castle, where the probable battle took place

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